

EU fisheries controls: more efforts needed

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

I. The Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) aims to ensure that fish stocks and the fishing sector are sustainable in the long term. Many stocks are still overfished, so continued efforts are necessary to manage fisheries effectively. The CFP therefore includes measures to restrict fishing fleet capacity and manage fisheries by imposing limits on catches (such as quotas) and fishing activity (such as fishing effort restrictions or technical rules for certain fisheries). The success of the CFP requires the design and implementation of an effective system of control. The CFP's control system was last reformed in 2009, to correct the serious weaknesses present at the time which were identified by the Court's Special Report No 7/2007.

II. The objective of our audit was to answer the question "Has the EU an effective fisheries control system in place?"

III. Since our 2007 audit, and the reform of the Control Regulation, the Member States and the Commission have made progress in several areas. However, we found that due to significant weaknesses in most audited areas, the European Union did not yet have a sufficiently effective system for fisheries controls in place to support the success of the CFP. Member States had not yet fully implemented the EU's fisheries control regulation and certain provisions of the regulation would need modification to enable Member States to effectively control fisheries activities.

IV. The Member States we visited did not sufficiently verify the accuracy of their fleets' capacity and of the information on the vessels in the fleet register. While the Control Regulation specifically provides rules for documentary and physical verifications of engine power, it does not do so for verifications of gross tonnage. We noted that the four Member States we visited did not verify the tonnage of their fishing vessels, and that two of them had not yet performed the required verifications of engine power. Additionally, we found a significant number of discrepancies between the vessel details recorded in the fleet register and those contained in the supporting documents.

V. We found that overall the Member States examined were implementing fisheries management measures adequately. The Member States vessel monitoring systems (VMS) using satellite-based tracking technology provided powerful information for monitoring and controlling fishing activities. However, as a result of the application of the rules of the Control Regulation 89 % of the EU fleet were not monitored by VMS, which hindered effective fisheries management in some fisheries and for some species.

VI. The Member States we visited managed well the uptake of the fishing quotas allocated to them. However, when Member State authorities allowed producer organisations to manage quota distribution, they did not always know which criteria were used to distribute the quotas to each of the beneficiaries. This lack of transparency makes it difficult for Member States to know the actual

beneficiaries of fishing opportunities and therefore to assess any potential adverse impact on the environment and local economies, and take the necessary corrective measures where appropriate. Moreover, this lack of transparency increases the risk that specific interests of certain economic operators are favoured at the expense of others. It was difficult to monitor compliance with fisheries management measures, especially for vessels not linked to satellite-based vessel monitoring systems. We did, however, see examples of good practice where professional fisheries organisations required their members to comply with additional, but more focused, conservation measures to those required by the Common Fisheries Policy.

VII. Data on fishing activities collected in the framework of the Control Regulation were not sufficiently complete and reliable. Catch data for vessels making paper-based declarations, which represent a significant portion of the EU fleet, was incomplete, and often incorrectly recorded on the Member States' databases. There were significant discrepancies between declared landings and subsequent records of first sale. Two of the four Member States visited did not sufficiently share and trace information concerning activities of vessels from one flag Member State in another. Member States' data validation processes were insufficient. In addition there were significant differences between the overall catch data recorded by the Member States, and that available to the Commission. The Control Regulation requires Member States to send aggregated catch data by stock. However, the fact that it does not require reporting with detail of fishing areas, size of vessels and fishing gears, limits detailed analysis of the European fleet activity.

VIII. In general, the Member States we visited planned and carried out fisheries inspections well. However, the fact that inspectors did not have real-time access to information about vessels reduced the effectiveness of inspections. Member States had established standardized inspection procedures, but we found cases where available report templates had not been used by inspectors. The inspection results were not always correctly reported in the national databases. We also found that sanctions applied were not always dissuasive. The points system, one of the main innovations of the current control regulation intending to ensure equal treatment of fishing operators, was applied to very different extents across Member States we visited and even within the same Member State. Finally, there is currently no European register of infringements and sanctions, which would allow a better follow-up of points applied, a more effective risk analysis and enhanced transparency among Member States.

IX. We make a number of recommendations to the Commission and Member States, aimed at improving the reliability of information on fishing fleets, the monitoring of fisheries management measures, the reliability of fisheries data, and inspections and sanctions.